

# LION (J. C.)

No. IX.



## CONCERNING THE NATURE of GYMNASTICS

and Gymnastics in School.

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BY J. C. LION.

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From the German by A. B. C. BIEWEND.

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### Concerning the Nature of Gymnastics and Gymnastics in School.

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So much has been said of the importance of gymnastics in school, that further explanations are worthy of notice as personal confessions only. Herein, however, it is hardly to be expected that anything essentially new be said, nor yet, in case this should happen, that the new be better than the old. Gymnastics, from its birth, has taken a place in the midst of life; it has, from the beginning, laid claims to public recognition, from the fact that it managed by its very appearance and high sounding promises on part of its advocates to draw public attention upon itself. Many of these promises were of a doubtful nature, others were founded on assumptions which public life never warranted, or did not at the time, at least, warrant. The other promises, when robbed of the ideal garment that ornamented them, were by no means important enough to become in reality an object of general interest. Gymnastics aimed to be, and could be, a public custom and public amusement, a basis of national strength, especially as an educational means. Thus it attracted the attention of the patriot, the statesman, the scholar and teacher in a like measure. A list of twenty-three pamphlets and works in which it is treated from a practical point of view, and is viewed closely from all sides, lies before me, not counting the numerous observations and hints, passed upon it in different periodicals and educational journals. From this great difference of opinions in regard to gymnastics which caused a continual wrangle between the political and pedagogic factions, *one good result* was obtained: the forced acknowledgment of its existence. It exists, its influence and power can no longer be denied, even those who oppose it in one direction, are compelled, on the other hand, to aid it. If it threatens with dangers, if to certain views of life it is objectionable or even terrorizing, then people think it best to take up its cause and assign to it other relations and aims, since denying its existence is impossible. But this is not all. No matter what relations and aims are ascribed to it, no matter by what explanation we try to overcome its influence, it at all times retains some of the stubborn impetuosity that marked its first days. A child

of the reformatory tendencies of an eventful epoch in history, it cannot for the present deny its innovating character. This is shown in state and public life by the power of forming sociétés and combining people, which it has latterly shown in a greater degree than heretofore, and through the spirit it creates in the better class of these societies. Propagation of gymnastics, the spreading of our ideas, fight for misconceived truths, are frequent and well-liked catch-words in the meetings of these societies. In the pedagogic world the days are over, when all existing rules of the school were to give way to those of the gymnasium. But, nevertheless, every reformer of public instruction demands, and justly, too, more physical exercise for the pupils of our schools, nor have the old accusations of physical degeneracy, moral weakness and unnatural mental education lost their strength; and no one who makes these charges can better the existing state of affairs without the aid of gymnastics. This character of innovation no doubt restrains many, who would otherwise befriend and advocate gymnastics, from acknowledging its worth. Its continual association with every other demand of reformers, which, duly considered, are often not deserving of recognition, must prejudice many against it, especially at a time in which the war between unsatisfied demands and existing circumstances wages more fiercely than ever. But while this is detrimental, it has also its good; if nothing else, one might find in it a proof of the necessity of its existence; one might gain a hope from it that gymnastics has a future, and will gain the stability it now lacks. But I find more than this, something that seems to me of much greater importance, namely, a confirmation of the conviction that gymnastics, which is constantly spoken of and demanded, when changes are contemplated, will really have great influence on the formation and conditions of public life, which define the general character of the future,

I refrain from making suppositions as to what kind these may be, or to predict positive results or express certain expectations. In fact, every one has his own ideas concerning them, and when asked is ready to give his answer, an answer inspired by his own personal cares, and the habits and inclinations that are peculiarly his own. But transformations, innovation, cultivation of new conditions of life, are, to say the least, ambiguous words, which certainly give rise to fears, when a nearer explanation is avoided. Who will, in such a case, guarantee that still hopes of a dangerous nature are entertained, the realization of which is hostile to the existence of the community, or at least with public morals and public education. To prove the harmlessness of my invention, I cannot but cite an example, which seems especially suited for putting it in a clearer light; for people are not much given to imputing destructive tendencies to such philologues who have united to put the golden age of their science behind them. Well, then, even these speak of an entirely different contemplation of the world, which differs as widely from ours as did that of the Romans from that of the Greeks. And to give form to this contemplation of the world of the future, to this third or fourth age, they, if I may use the expression, inter-marry the youthful freshness of the beloved ancient times with

the force of soul and the sober, inquiring disposition of modern times. Now, who would blame one of these, if he should feel a breath of the youthful freshness that he needs for his future in the gymnasium? Such a thought was it that I brought into connection with my former words. But I insist upon the right of the mathematician, not to decide such uncertain and conflicting suppositions in advance, and to be allowed to consider it superfluous to increase the number of uncertain and conflicting suppositions by new ones, and yet to consider many great things possible and to believe in their advancement. For the thought to regard a thing that we advocate in life as a gift of the future, *i. e.*, something in which the future rejoices, and without which it would not be what it is, perfectly human and natural, and for the teacher almost indispensable. This must, however, not be confounded with a pedagogic maxim, which shall serve to have a positive influence on my decisions in answering practical questions; nor must it be taken for a pedagogic principle, to which it bears resemblance, which commands the teacher, never to lose sight of the future over the present, just as another demands that the rights of the latter be not encroached upon for the sake of the former. For I have spoken of a strong confidence only, which shall in doubtful and disturbed times give me new courage and strength. This confidence has a double basis. On the one hand it is the faith in higher results of pedagogism, which the pedagogue flatters himself to see not only in the single pupil who happens to sit before him on the school-bench, but in the character and disposition of entire ages. On the other hand it is the faith in the inner strength of gymnastics which has come out of so many battles victoriously without denying its nature. Teachers and gymnasts have written and spoken of its practicability as an educational means; the former had but little faith in it, had no positive knowledge of its strength, or feared evil results from it, the latter therefore looked upon the former as very doubtful friends or misjudged the importance of several educational elements and consequently antagonized them. I feel safe and contented where peace and *harmony* reigns. In writing this my main object is to offer testimony for the existence of this *harmony*, or at least for the strenuous efforts towards it. There are different ways by which I may gain my object. The nearest would be the execution of an entirely self-dependent discussion of a philosophical nature, in which all conclusions that are necessary to our testimony, would be made one after another, from one single, firmly-based principle. But I feel too keenly the difficulty of this. I also fear too much the danger which lies in the fact that the whole fabric would lose its force of argument as soon as a doubt arises as to the stability of a single point. I have, therefore, decided on mustering who have lately unrolled their flags on this field. The first characteristic of the factions is the starting point, from which they formed the ideas they proclaim and the claims they advocate. For while in pursuing and advancing their ideas and claims, they often meet and coincide, we sometimes find a peculiar streak of light fall on the path they have chosen which defines more clearly the blending outlines and shows distinctly the reason why they have a right to appear and co-operate here. For this reason I begin my work

with the question after the origin, the real home of the different factions. Here I notice, to continue the figure, *two main roads*, which crowds are traveling. On one I see those who are in favor of physical culture in the schools, and want to make use of what they find suitable in gymnastics for this purpose, subject to their ideas and wishes; or I see eager friends of gymnastics, who demand that it be made a regular branch of study in the schools, because they have learned to value it highly from personal experience as to its beneficiary results. On the other hand, I notice those who borrow their reasons for their ideas and convictions from an independent science, medical science for instance, or those who transport the perceptions and experiences they may have made in the study of the culture and history of strange nationalities, to the circumstances that exist in their own country. On both roads we meet practitioners and theorists. For two reasons it is a pleasing sign that we meet so great a number on the second road, too, for it is but reasonable to assume that we will hear from them peculiar views and ideas, the consideration and deliberation of which can be but useful to us. Especially does this latter class desire a cordial co-operation of prudent physicians and gymnasts, the cause of which might as well be stated here. Most of our readers will know that gymnastics was revived in Sweden simultaneously with *Jahn*, and that it was enthusiastically received. The founder of the Swedish system, Pere Henric Ling, was more fortunate than his German colleague, for he was allowed to put into practice and develop his art without interruption for twenty years. Highly educated and enthusiastic, he gained for himself the esteem of his countrymen, who look upon him as one of their greatest benefactors, and rank him with such men as Linné and Berzelius. It is said that his exercises are diligently and generally practiced, especially during the winter months. Yet he himself did not lay so much weight on practical counsel and execution; his endeavors were on one side to develop a system of gymnastics, and on the other, the theoretical confirmation of gymnastics in its minutest details, by precepts of anatomy and physiology.

(1) The subjective-active or *pedagogic* gymnastic art: Its object is to enable man to control his limbs. It is therefore similar to what is generally understood by gymnasts.

(2) The objective-active or military gymnastic art: Its object is to enable man to exercise a positive influence on some opposing mind. Wrestling and fencing are therefore its main constituents.

(3) The subjective-passive or medical gymnastic art: Its object is the prevention or cure of human ills by regulated, outer mechanical influence. It is, therefore, a separate part of medical science, but much more comprehensible than common orthopedic; and lastly

(4) The objective-passive or *aesthetic* gymnastic art, a combination of mimicry, from orchestric, even rhetoric, etc., one point of view.

It would lead too far were I to review the whole system and show the many defects that greatly detract from its beauty and tenability. Nor does it require a very great amount of common sense to detect the logical and

natural errors Ling is guilty of. The work in which he attempts his systematic arrangement was published under the title of a general foundation of gymnastic art, after his death, and his system really made but little progress. Here lately again the attempt has been made to transplant it to German soil, and the promotores of the undertaking seek their allies not in the camp of pedagogues, but among physicians and occasionally politicians, and have by this brought on a discussion which has awakened in me the desire for a precise, dietetical confirmation of gymnastic art, as it is, and which induced me to mention the circumstances alluded to. Now, but few German physicians have taken the trouble to say anything of importance in this quarrel, be it that they are too good house friends to sit in judgment of the efforts of their erring countrymen, or be it from the conviction that they are hardly competent to judge rightly in the matter; for their science is as yet far from being the human science par excellence, which, on account of the progress medical science has made, they imagine it to be. The war-cry of the physicians is this: Health; but precious gift that health is, it would be foolish to exhaust all educational methods and laws of society in its cultivation. Nevertheless, it happens every now and then that some come out with this war-cry to scare the world and especially the pedagogues, whose unenviable fate it is and always has been, that every one who has ever sat on a school bench feels called upon to give him advice, and tell him just how to run a school, while he is to have no opinion in everyday matters. Until now all these croakers and instigators have spoken for the introduction of gymnastics in general, they were the allies of the friends of gymnastic art, but the medical gymnastic art of the Swedes seems to have shown a new light to this or that one which he needs, dare not hide under a bushel. The medical gymnastic art of the Swedes is a literal execution of a thought expressed by Baco: *Vix inventatur aliqua inclinatis in morbum, qui non exercitatione quidam corrigi posset.* Now, it cannot be denied, they say, that every one of you carries within him an inclination for some disease. This is the title of law under which medical gymnastics devours its sisters, and among the first pedagogy, this is the maxim which physicians find so attractive, a truth older, much older, than Baco, which is entirely meaningless and has never been denied, but which they feel called upon to renew. There are many different answers to it. The simplest is, without doubt, that which a celebrated Saxon professor gave at the close of a medical lecture on this same subject, when his mode and rules of living were compared: Who tells you, pray, that I want to be healthy? And the simplest answer is generally the best and most satisfactory, for man has certainly more to do than to live for his health only, especially as his health is supposed to be failing, so soon as he frets about it. But to return to the explanation, from which I started in this whole affair, I add: Let them verify Baco's thought as quickly as possible, by inventing in the first place a positive cure for all these wicked and underhand inclinations, and above all let them teach us to know them, they will find us ready and willing pupils. But until this has been done, we ask to be permitted to have our own views, and to uphold that sort of gymnastics which we have not only found to be sen-

sible and health promoting, but which has been productive of results, much greater and better than the new gospel even promises. Now, if the disciples of the latter argue from the preparatory work of the Swedes, it becomes necessary to look at the question from another point of view. I said before that it was both wrong and foolish to assert that the only gymnastic art entitled to recognition was one based on a medical foundation, and I now deny the possibility of a gymnastic art acceptable to every one. If anything, gymnastics is something purely national, that loses its whole strength so soon as it is taken and separated from the interest of the people. Each nation may have its own system of gymnastics, and the first signs of it are found with every nation, but the one cannot forthwith adopt that of the other, but if one nation takes up the system of another it will at once proceed to alter it, and if not satisfied with the altered system, will drop it entirely. General gymnastics, the same physical exercises for all nations is an impossibility. Every gymnastic exercise is in itself a work of art, which, limited by the conditions of place and time, can make but a passive impression. But a thing that shall belong to all nations at the same time, and become the common property of all mankind, must be something that is strong and lasting, or at least something that will not be altered or changed by a repetition of itself. A list of bodily exercises intended to show every possible motion of the human limbs would naturally be the same for the African as it would be for the European or American, but the human body is more than a mere machine that does its work mechanically. The characteristics of nationality never manifest themselves more clearly than in the expression which a person puts in his natural or such motions that are intended as motions only. In mimicry he copies carefully the customs of all nations and times, in gymnastics, however, he is at all times himself only, just as he is unconscious of the impressions and sensations of the moment. If the reader be unacquainted with the gymnastic exercises of the different nations, let him compare, in this same sense, their dances deprived of mimic element, nor do I ask him to go to the uncivilized nations for this purpose; let him compare the Frenchman with the Spaniard, the German with the Pole. Better yet, let him compare the games of different people and countries, the cricket of the Englishman with the base-ball of the American for instance, and he will find the truth of our assertion. And in a same manner gymnastic art is a production of national life, and modestly asks for nothing more than to be a special gift and joy of the people. The advocates of the Swedish gymnastic art boldly claim that it is sufficient for the whole world, they even go so far as to demand that it alone receive recognition, a demand that seems the more unreasonable the closer you examine the Swedish system. For in reality it lacks, just like the Swedish nation, the universality of the Germans. Notwithstanding the extent of territory on which its founder tried to force its recognition, it possesses this quality in a much smaller degree than the German system, which endeavored to survey the products of other nations and to profit by their experience. What makes the Swedish system valuable to us, is its essentially national character, its peculiar

presumption, its self-sufficiency and limitations to few means, the fine cultivation of the single in the closely defined circle of forms. Cool, strict and deliberate are the motions it prescribes. Outwardly this characteristic coolness and moderation manifests itself in two ways, namely, in the use and practice of exercises without apparatus, and secondly, in the peculiar arrangement of so-called supports or helps, which the gymnasts extend to each other for the sake of making the exercise easier or more difficult. Let one example suffice. On command, the single pupils step out of the ranks and form behind each other in pairs. The one in front is commanded to raise both arms upward. Before he does this, however, his assisting comrade places the hands on the shoulders, (both when raising and lowering them) and when the former raises his arms, the second assists in the motion by a gentle pressure upwards, or moderates and regulates the motion by a gentle pressure downwards. I do not know whether such exercises are pleasing to the teacher or not. Much can be said in their favor, and worthy of special notice is the finer feeling and the readiness to help others it awakens and fosters in the pupil. But take a crowd of boisterous boys and spirited youths out into the meadows and forests, and see what they would make of them. The exercises of the *German gymnastic system* may not be so carefully weighed and considered separately, nor may their order be so regular, for we owe them not to sober, old men, but to the strong, healthy young men, but for all that they are by no means less useful and to the purpose, besides being of greater variety. Short, quick, decisive movements, in which a justified consciousness of strength manifests itself, are the formal characteristics of the German system of gymnastics. It accounts the positive much higher than the pleasing and the polished.

If we will observe the statues, which represent gymnastic scenes from the Greek gymnasiums, we cannot fail to notice these characteristics of the German gymnastic art, from another point of view. For while, (if I read correctly) the feelings expressed in the faces of the Greeks indicate chiefly an insatiable ambition, a suppressed feeling of bodily pain, while disgust and moderation contend for the supremacy, the gymnastic exercises of the German system demonstrate by the facial expression of the gymnasts; the strictest possible attention and the centering of all the faculties of mind and body on one certain point, as the nature of the exercise requires. Proofs for this is furnished in every gymnasium. Therefore the action of lively but bashful gymnasts, when they know themselves to be observed, is not to be wondered at. Many of them do an exercise in a quiet, self-possessed manner, free from all distress, just because it absorbs their whole attention, but immediately after the exercise is finished, this secure feeling leaves them, they lose their confident air, and turn their head first this way, then that way, like one who has just awakened from sleep or from a dream, far removed from all impressions of reality. But there is another thing which estranges the German system of gymnastics from the Swedish system, especially from the sober seriousness which the Swedes demand, namely this, we do not reject with disdain such exercises as are apt to amuse. Maybe not one-half of our exercises can be

called beautiful, all others are amusing only. Should a new Lukianos create a new Anacharsis as "advocatus diaboli" of gymnastics, he would find richer and better opportunities to vent his sarcasm in cloudy Germany than in sunny Greece. Take from the gymnasium the amusing and humorous exercises, and nothing but dullness and melancholy remains, all gladness, all gaiety is gone, and all endeavors on your part will be in vain to teach the pupils entrusted to your care to conceal in a respectful manner the weariness and disgust that comes over them more and more each day.

This idea of the national character of gymnastics is of great importance from another point of view. For while all other sciences and arts, which are taught in school, as a rule take us beyond the limits of our own country, for sciences and fine arts are common property of all civilized countries, national gymnastics bring us to our own country; and by fostering and strengthening within us the peculiar characteristics which distinguish us from our neighbors, kindles in us a love for our country and develops in us a strong patriotism. If, then, there are persons who can't bring themselves to fancy gymnastics for its own sake, they will find in this a strong appeal how to be guided in their actions. For the idea of patriotic, national action has from its infancy been one of the main objects of gymnastics. True gymnastics in every instance educates patriots, because it always remains an emblem of national characteristics; it grows and prospers with the increase of national pride; it sinks and disappears whenever the latter grows weaker and dies out, and in strengthening the one, we fortify the other. If we want historical proofs for these assertions, the history of Switzerland furnishes them, where a carefully nursed patriotism has watched over some few national bodily exercises through centuries, for the fortification of its country, to say nothing of the simultaneous revival of gymnastic art and national pride in the war of 1812 of the Germans. But the most convincing proof of our assertions is found in the gymnastics of the Greeks. The gymnastic art of the Greeks was the model of the German gymnastic art; to its investigation, which was actively encouraged by the efforts of the present age, it owes much, both from a theoretical and practical point of view. It sees pictured in the former's fate, its own fate; derives from it instruction, hope and ideals. To further this modeling, this imitating and borrowing is the duty of the legitimate exponents of antiquity, namely the philologists; and as they feel called upon to pay especial attention to the education of youth, their influence will naturally not cease in undue time. If the antiquarian revivification of Hellenic gymnastics is faulty here and there, that does not concern us. But for the purpose of keeping its influence in the proper limits and of removing the danger of willful action, a complete comparison between Greek gymnastics and the German gymnastic art would be of great benefit. But this is hardly the place for it. Such a comparison, however, would, first of all, lead to a detailed discussion of what is latterly called material for exercise. Herein the German method far excels the older sister, for its exercises are distinctly separate from each other by virtue of differences and changes, and through this alone they are very numerous. Anything

new that chance brought up in the gymnasium was immediately retained in distinct form, named and entered for the new generation farther advanced and better skilled in explanatory and descriptive science than their ancestors, could not resist the desire for a systematic order ; so eager were they herein, that owing to the immense increase of exercises, it is easier to do good gymnastic work without the use of the long lists and systems of bodily exercises, than to keep supervision over all the different things that are mentioned in them. The Greeks knew nothing of classified exercises. To these pertain all exercises which necessitate the use of artificial apparatus. Greek gymnastics was partial to the hand to hand conflicts between individuals, in which the effort and the victory were immediately rewarded by a prize ; and is therefore necessarily poor in all such exercises, whose only object is activity, nor has it an over-abundance of such exercises, the beneficiary results of which are looked for in the invigoration and strengthening of the body. In the second place we would have to give our attention to what the Greek and the German method have in common, namely the science of technical terms, for while the differences are, without doubt, very great, we find on the other hand a great many resemblances and similarities. Any one posted in ancient history can't fail to recognize that our wrestling-matches are patterned after those of the ancient Greeks, and the similarity is greatest in those points which the plastic art of the ancients retained as characteristic. Of course, it is a difficult matter to decide how much is original and how much is imitation. It would also be of great interest to know positively how great was the strength and endurance, especially in running, jumping and throwing, of the Greeks compared to that of the Germans. But it is a deplorable fact, that reliable information on this point is very meagre and myth-like; but it is nevertheless probable that time will teach us the limits set for human strength and endurance were not wider in ancient times than they are at present. These points would be the most important to be considered in a closer examination and appraisement of the value of Greek and German gymnastics. But this does not by any means exhaust the comparison ; on the contrary, it throws an entirely different light on the matter, when we look at the position which gymnastics holds in the community, and the influence it really possesses. If the Germans are somewhat ahead of the Greeks in the first part of the comparison, the feeling that takes possession of us, when we picture to ourselves a Greek palestra, is purely one of envy. For what splendor in the Hellenic gymnasiums, what feasts and festivities, what honors for the victors in the contests ! And all this not forced from an unwilling public, but advocated and protected by unanimous favor of highly educated persons. While with us we find a scarcity of means, which detracts even from the most carefully prepared work, thus giving our enemies new cause for attack, and which, if it does not create enmity, at least gives rise to numerous disagreeable prejudices and doubts. And this feeling of envy grows stronger, when we read the best work of ancient times on gymnastics—Lukian's *Anacharsis*. For if Solon's brilliant rhetorical powers in

defense of gymnastics do not capture the reader, this one thing, against which no reply can be made, remains, namely that these exercises were a native custom, closely interwoven with the very existence of the Greeks, an essential and lasting foundation of their education, for no Greek needed to blush for public custom; on the contrary, in supporting and upholding it, he did honor and service to himself and his country. How strong must this consciousness of receiving credit for its work have made the Greek youths, how firmly it must have guided them: while with us, if one of our pupils accidentally puts the question, why gymnastics are recommended to himself, he can but seldom give an answer that does not leave room for strong doubt, so that it requires the wisdom of a Socrates in bringing the questioner to the admission that he takes pleasure in gymnastic exercises, and to confess that they are of great value to himself and the people in general. Verily, we are not blind to the advantages of Greek gymnastics in this respect; how gladly would we exchange this spirit of newness that characterizes, as I said before, our system, for a self-satisfied feeling of positive possession. But being firmly convinced that for the present this is not to be thought of, that however gymnastic art, as it is, meets all demands of public sentiment and youths' education, we are unwilling to exchange it for a later imitation of Greek gymnastics. If some few warm admirers of the ancient gymnastic art, as for instance the author of the prize essay on Hellenic gymnastics, H. Jaeger, from a prejudice for the Hellenian, regard the present gymnastic art as abstract, learned and fond of clap-traps, we can only express our regret over the fact that they have not yet became acquainted with, and do not know how, to appreciate its natural and practical value. We call their attention to the fact that it is foolish to sacrifice the product of the mental work of centuries, which also manifests itself in the care and attention which has been given to the selection and classification of our gymnastic exercises to the phantom of an idea, the realization of which no one guarantees, and to throw aside a positive possession, that promises a better feature, for the simple reason that others, before us and under other entirely different circumstances, have felt freer, safer and happier. We accuse them of misconceiving what really constitutes the meaning of a historical development, partly because they believe to be able to change the character of an age after willful precepts, and partly because they overlook the fact that all these little things which they borrow from the past, are so closely linked with everything pertaining to the then existing condition of things, that taken alone, they possess neither sense nor value. Thus the revivers of Hellenic gymnastics scorned, for instance, boxing matches and nakedness and wish to select from the Hellenic exercises running, jumping, throwing and wrestling only. But Hellenic antiquity is no ruin from which one may take stones for a new building. The benefits of Hellenic gymnastics were benefits to the Greeks and their time. That time has passed, mankind has grown older and soberer, passions that were pardoned in youth, fiery ambition, pride of beauty, with which Hellenic gymnastics filled its pupils, it no longer sanctions. The Greeks, moreover, were highly gifted and better fav-

ored by heaven and earth, unconsciously carried within them a moderation that protected them against immediate degeneration, but where would we land, should we allow naturalness to unrestricted freedom? Let people say that the Greek art was more captivating and natural, all that does not gainsay our views and opinions. To review shortly our object in view, we will state that we demand, for us, and our circumstances, the German system of gymnastics. We want it in its entirety, unencumbered, with its riches of exercises, its power of developing and educating and the fullness of good results it promises, as regards a sanitary education. Open to and anxious for outer influences, ready to receive sound advice at all times, we most emphatically protest against all encroachments upon our rights, for we are satisfied, from the very attacks made upon us, that we cannot have strayed so very far from the right path; and this fact removes the few doubts, which shake our faith on which we base our opinions.









